

**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO SERIOUSLY REDUCE POVERTY? -
COMMUNITY ACTION DIRECTOR GWEN ROBINSON IS FIRST SPEAKER
IN A COMMUNITY FORUM SERIES**

What would it take to bring about a significant reduction in poverty in Greater Cincinnati? At the Community Issues Forum on February 25th, Gwen Robinson, Executive Director of the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Community Action Agency, responded to this question from her vantage point as the longtime leader of an organization that emerged in the mid-1960s as a key agency in President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." Robinson's talk kicked off a new Forum series entitled "Are we really serious about addressing poverty: What would it take to bring about real change?"

After opening her talk with a humorous disclaimer that poverty is too huge a topic to give to a speaker, Gwen Robinson then addressed the subject with both facts and a cogent analysis. She quipped that a lot has happened since Johnson's "Great Society," and that certain major factors make it difficult to reduce poverty. Instead of focusing on the real causes of poverty, a lot public officials accept the rhetoric that emerged in the late 1970s that blames poor people for their plight.

This blaming the victim mentality, according to Robinson, is one of the factors that motivated elected officials in recent years to greatly weaken the safety net. A longtime Entitlement Program, Aid to Families With Dependent Children, was eliminated in 1996. Meanwhile, other programs and services that assist low-income families and individuals have been cut to the bone. If we are serious about reducing poverty, she said, we must stop cutting the safety net programs that assist people in getting back on their feet.

Robinson declared she can refute the notion that poor people don't want to work. Ninety percent of the low-income parents of children attending the Head Start Programs operated by CAC are working one or two jobs. Those that don't have a job certainly want one.

Economic policy, emphasized Robinson, is a key to reducing poverty. We have to increase the ability of people to work, and for that work they must be paid a living wage. The current minimum wage covers the cost of living in 1968, and a major step would be for Congress to significantly raise it.

Robinson declared a need for more job training programs to give people the skills for earning more income. She cited the example of a program operated by Community Action that trains participants to become truck drivers.

Creating more livable wage jobs, according to Robinson, is another essential step. "We may need another WPA that would train and hire people to construct and rebuild public projects." Certainly our infrastructure and transportation systems are in need of major repair, she noted.

Whether it's mending the public safety net or moving toward livable-wage employment,

emphasized Robinson, such efforts should be directed toward strengthening family life. Another “huge issue” with a detrimental impact on families and their economic survival is “mass incarceration.” This mass incarceration of especially African-American young men, she pointed out, splits families apart and keeps them in poverty. “Men come out of prison untrained for legitimate work and owing child support.”

Focusing on education and investing in early childhood development, Robinson averred, are long term solutions for reducing poverty. She acknowledged that the Head Start Program currently serves about 40% of the children who qualify for it. She is hopeful that “Preschool Promise” will be an initiative that finances high quality preschool for all poor families in Cincinnati.

Cincinnati, she pointed out, is still a segregated city. It is segregated, she noted, by both race and income. Only by breaking down this separation by race and economic resources will we really have a chance of significantly reducing poverty.

Finally, Robinson concluded: “We must change the will of the people!” For a period of time during the 1960s under leaders like Martin Luther King, we came together as a people to declare that segregation and poverty were unacceptable. “We must again bring the voices of good will together and collaborate!”